

MAJOR BORUM AND THE THIEF

By Martha McCulloch Williams

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By Martha McCulloch Williams.

Old man Buckley, one of Marshalltown's three inveterate toppers, was trying to sober up against his daughter's wedding. When he had his complement of drinks, he was to outward seeming as sober as a judge. Lack of them set him reeling upon his horse and guiding the sagacious beast in letter S's all over the road.

"Look," Major Borum said to Molly, his niece and adopted heiress. "That's what I'm trying to save you from—the thing which biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder."

"You needn't try to make out poor Jink is a snake," Molly said spiritedly. "I'm sure he wouldn't crawl, not even to get me."

"Oh, ho! You think it was his independence that kept him from signing the pledge when I demanded it of him," the major said, with a fine, lofty scorn. Again Molly tossed her head.

"I would have said no to him if he had signed it," she said. "Why, Jink was never drunk but once in his life, and that was in the way of business. If he had not drunk to match that Long Hollow crowd, his pa would have lost all their trade, and it's worth a thousand dollars clear profit every year."

The major groaned. He was a round, plump man, rosy faced, with little eyes twinkling through smothering fat. He had come back to his native town the year before breathing out a vague aroma of riches and ready to give advice offhand to anything from divine Providence to the town council. Marshalltown folk said he was cram full of crank notions, which he had had no chance to spend properly in governing a wife or bringing up children of his own.

He struck Marshalltown a teetotaler of the first water, the second water and also the third. Water was indeed his creed and rallying cry for the time being. His mind and heart were set upon organizing a temperance knight-hood after ideas peculiarly his own.

Marshalltown would have none of the knight-hood. It was so temperate, letting the single saloon languish except at Christmas time and the Fourth of July, that it resented organized temperance much as it might have resented the organization of an antislavery brotherhood. To its mind a man ought to drink when he felt like it and had good liquor handy, but should never be tempted into swallowing stuff he did not really care for by giving it the tang of forbidden fruit. So it heartily applauded Jink Travis' refusal to become the first fruits of the major's enthusiasm. It was a fine thing, everybody admitted, seeing how matters stood. Jink as good as engaged to Molly and Molly's heiress-ship contingent on her marrying to suit the major.

Jink and Molly had been lovers time out of mind. It was all settled that they should marry when Jink was taken into the firm. But the major came down upon them three months before the sign, "Travis & Son, Groceries, Hardware, Provisions, Liquors, Wholesale and Retail," went up upon the big block at the head of the main street. Molly had eight younger brothers and sisters. Her father could not hope to do more than feed and clothe them. So the major and his fortune had to be taken into account, especially when he asked to have Molly the same as his own child.

That was where the pinch came. For herself and Jink, Molly could have bidden the fortune go hang. But the children! She could not shut out her mother's anxious eyes, her father's patient, troubled face. As long as she did not rebel openly she was free to help with both hands. So she contented herself with vowing she would die an old maid unless she might marry Jink and smiling her sweetest at Jink himself when ever she got the chance.

Jink could not well be so patient. He wanted a wife, a home of his own and Molly for that wife. He was ready to do anything reasonable to get her. He might have gone in for that knight-hood foolishness if he had not known she would be the first to despise him for it. He might even have done it and tried to square himself later with his sweetheart if he had been sure the major was honest in his crankiness. Somehow the major's enthusiasm rang false to him. Under and behind the flow of words he saw something in the unctuous lips, the beady, twinkling eyes, which made him suspect that the major, like other self-deluded mortals, was more anxious to pose as a great moral force than to rule strictly his own appetites.

Indeed, as Dan Brown put it, "the cut of the major's jib gave him away for a blamed old hypocrite." Dan Brown was Jink's chum, the head man at the new electric light plant, which Travis & Son had done so much to get installed. Of course, their own store was the very first to be wired and lighted. All the first week afterward Jink himself did nothing much but march around with swarming rural customers and flash lights into every dark hole and corner from the third story to the cellar. In the flashing he incidentally made them sure there was no danger of getting a stroke of lightning. Otherwise trade might have suffered.

"I say this yere profligate, it jest knocks the socks off anything ever I saw," Squire Crane said as Jink made the cellar dark or light by the

mere turning of a button. Afterward he explained that the cellar would be always light. Then everybody smiled. That meant something to Travis' customers. Ever since the store opened there had been a barrel of the best whisky conveniently remote from general view, but free to whoever chose to go and take a drink. It was, of course, a point of honor not to drink unless you were a pretty good customer. Major Borum was a pretty good customer, in spite of social complications, but nobody ever suspected him of even knowing where the barrel stood.

It lay bung up, with the thief hanging upon a handy nail in the wall a foot away. The thief, understand, was only an innocent tin tube, open at both ends and slender enough to slip easily through the bung-hole. In use it was thrust down into the liquor, open end. Then a finger held close over the upper end made it fetch out enough liquor for a drink, stiff or mild according to the depth of the plunge. By way of keeping the thief in place a little ring had been soldered on to the upper end, a long wire twisted in the ring and likewise made fast to the nail in the wall. Careless drinkers might otherwise have dropped the invaluable tube or absentminded ones, after the third drink, have gone off with it in the pocket.

Throughout the summer Major Borum came into the store only when he had business, but as the days grew short and nipping he fell into a way of sitting into the group around the stove, listening when he had to—that was rather seldom—and talking when he could—that was most of the time.

Toward Christmas the major haunted the store more than ever, especially late in the day when there was always plenty of trade. He had got so familiar he went everywhere, up stairs or down, without exciting comment. Some few said he was simmering down. They reckoned it would be all right between Jink and Molly by—well, say, next spring; but Jink and Molly knew better. Indeed they had almost lost hope when Dan Brown came to their help.

The lights had been working badly, so Dan chased down into the cellar about dusk one night to look after the switchboard. In a minute he came up, his eyes staring like saucers, beckoned Jink to him and plunged again below. Nobody saw any more of them that night. They worked in the cellar until near 12 o'clock and went home clucking aloud.

All next day Jink moved like a man in a dream, waiting upon customers with his head half turned over his shoulder. It was a busy day, Saturday, and the world and his wife were in town. About noon, when the crush was greatest, everybody was startled by a succession of pells, unearthly, agonizing, coming up, it seemed, from right under their feet. Three parts of the hearers dashed into the street, two women fainted, and old lady Buckley snatched up her basket of eggs, crying out that she "allus knew som'n' was bound ter happen ter that store ever sence they took an' made candles outen the Lord A'mighty's own thunder." But half a dozen rushed below, where the screams still kept up, intermingled now with roars of strenuous laughter.

There was more laughing when they saw the whole thing—Major Borum, their in hand, howling, hopping from one foot to the other, unable to let go and between howls swearing like a pirate at Dan Brown, who stood with his hand upon an innocent looking key newly set in the switchboard.

Dan was saying between gasps: "You've got to agree, major. Let Jink have Molly or here you stay all day. You can't let go that thief. It's got a full lamp voltage. We fixed it, Jink and I, as soon as ever I caught you taking a drink on the sly."

"No, no, Dan. I can't let you persecute Molly's uncle," Jink said, reaching for the key. "I'm awfully obliged to you, though, for watching here," he went on. "You know," to those behind him, "we could not afford to turn on the current—until we were sure of our man."

"I sorter reckon you've made sure of your gal," old man Buckley said as the crestfallen major vanished up the stairs. Sure enough, it turned out that Jink had.

"The Light That Failed." A wealthy Riverina squatter, now departed, as he used to phrase it, "to the great Muster," was noted almost as much for his Attie wit as for his parsimony. He also stuttered very badly and helped along his halting utterance with a frequent ejaculation of "Dye see? Dye see?" His nigardly traits gained him wide-spread local unpopularity and the bitter enmity of sundowners, who were always rigorously refused rations at his stations.

Smarting under this unusual inhospitality, some disappointed swagwags on occasion set fire to one of the squatter's wool sheds and then wrote upon a gate: "We've well burnt down your wool shed. Dye see? Dye see?"

Of course, it caught the big man's eye when next he passed through. For a moment he contemplated the announcement and then with a sardonic grin took the stump of a blue pencil from his pocket and scribbled underneath: "It was well insured. Dye see? Dye see?"—Household Words.

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